

Ornithological Competence and Literary Biodiversity in Spanish American Poetry

Porque sé el nombre del pájaro, lo veo.

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In *Artefactos*—a book published in 1972 which was not in fact a book, but a box of postcards—, Chilean “antipoet” Nicanor Parra included the image of four fraught-faced men exclaiming: “In the name of God, what flowers are those?!” The only calm-looking character in the drawing replies: “WATER LILIES” (Parra 397).¹ This “artifact” alludes to a well-known anecdote about Spanish modernist² poet Francisco Villaespesa, who once, as he walked through Madrid’s Parque del Retiro with fellow poet and philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, is supposed to have pointed to a pond and asked the name of the flowers covering it. His friend answered, with disdain, something on the lines of “they’re the water lilies your poems are so full of.” Villaespesa’s ignorance is revealing in two ways: firstly, because since the days of Modernism many poets in Spanish have deemed it unnecessary to be acquainted, through first-hand experience, with the flora and fauna (water lilies, nightingales, swans...) they write about, as that same flora and fauna has a life of its own in its century-old trajectory through literary history; secondly, because Villaespesa’s botanical incompetence is run-of-the-mill in contemporary authors and readers in Spanish, particularly in authors and readers who are city-dwellers.³

A decade after Noam Chomsky, in the Sixties, formulated the concept of “linguistic competence,” Jonathan Culler proposed the idea of “literary competence” as a *sine qua non*

for the understanding of a poem (Culler 113-130). In the context of the problems faced by the world today and the ecological illiteracy that besets both us and, more decisively, our leaders in the late Anthropocene, we should surely be talking of the need for *ecological competence* in literature, for worldviews showing insight or understanding of the interconnectedness of life. It is hardly farfetched to imagine that this sort of ecological competence may be demanded by future readers as they become more and more aware of the threats facing the world, and more critical and impatient with texts blind to the danger. What interests me here, however, is both more specific and more rudimentary.

In mid-April a few years back, in an undergraduate poetry class, I announced to my students that the swifts were back and read them the opening to Ted Hughes' "Swifts" and then Peruvian Emilio Adolfo Westphalen's "Arriba bajo el cielo" (High up under the Sky). They looked at me blankly. They didn't know the word *vencejos*. I opened the window and signaled the shrill, dark birds wheeling round the Faculty building. Some had never seen them; others thought they were swallows. Maybe someone knew but didn't want to say. Maybe they were ashamed. Perhaps it's nerdish to recognize a swift. I am no different. I recently discovered that the tree intruding onto my Madrid third-floor balcony, that blossoms each March and whose sparrows fascinate my cats, is a pear tree. We've been living here for ten years.

In the same way that we have become blind to the species that share our ecosystems, twentieth and twenty-first-century authors and readers have grown bereft of the *ornithological* and *botanical competence* needed to appreciate the areas of non-human nature traditionally fondest to poets and, in this case, to Spanish American poets prior to Modernism. As concepts, these should be seen, firstly, as competence in the ability of perceiving, recognizing and understanding the flora (botanical competence) or birds (ornithological competence), not only in general, but in the case of each specific country or

region. To what extent does a text include in its universe other species of flora and fauna, and to what extent does it contemplate their coexistence and interactions with the human subject? And we, as readers confronted with a text that names different species, do we have the competence necessary to recognize them, to know and experience them beyond their verbal existence, and beyond the symbolic aura created around them by literary tradition; that is to say, are we able to experience them as corporeal beings which awaken in us memories and knowledge –fruit of experience, primarily, but also of research driven by curiosity– that are not strictly literary?

Those literary and symbolic meanings are of course vital in botanical and ornithological competence, but at a second level. Their dominance, above all in Spanish poetry, has had an asphyxiating effect. Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez, in his notes on Modernism, reflected on the importance in poetry of the unsayable: “God, love, beauty and poetry are ineffable. They cannot be described exactly” (*Dios, el amor, la belleza, la poesía son inefables. No se pueden describir con exactitud*). In the realm of absolute values and truths, the ineffable can be reached only by poetry, never through science or philosophy. Juan Ramón exemplified this metaphysical notion of poetry with a concrete example: “In general, poets who are considered universal avoid precise details: flower and bird, not fuchsia and golden oriole” (*En general, los poetas llamados universales no detallan con precisión: la flor y el pájaro, no la fucsia y la oropéndola*) (Jiménez 194-195). This idea can of course lead to a brutal loss in literary biodiversity –the range of species to be found in an author or text’s literary universe–, and to the use and abuse of the generic terms “bird” and “flower,” along with a handful of species readily attached to symbolic meanings (nightingales, roses, etc.). Knowing the relevant literary tradition and its symbolic treatment of each species is undoubtedly necessary, although from a contemporary perspective, in the context of universal biodiversity loss, a writer or reader’s botanical or ornithological competence surely cannot be

complete without first or second-hand acquaintance with the species in question. Perhaps we should step back in time to 1912, to Ezra Pound's imagist "credo" about symbols: "I believe that the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object, that if a man use 'symbols' he must so use them that their symbolic function does not obtrude; so that a sense, and the poetic quality of the passage, is not lost to those who do not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance, a hawk is a hawk" (Pound 9). To be convincing as symbols, hawks, roses and nightingales must first and foremost be hawks, roses and nightingales. A hawk is a hawk is a hawk...

At a third level, ornithological competence demands a knowledge that goes beyond literature and embraces the cultural traditions of each language, country or region. This means taking into account the role of birds in founding myths, but also the way they have historically interacted with communities, resulting in their appearance in local folklore, and in popular proverbs and superstitions. A clear example of ornithological competence in this sense, combined with decades of precise observation, is Mapuche poet Lorenzo Aillapan, a self-baptized *Üñümche* or bird-man who has written bilingual poems about almost 70 different species, describing each bird and its relation to the community, and closing every stanza with a two-line onomatopoeic refrain.⁴

The genre of poetry, traditionally so abundant in birdlife, requires ornithological competence. Lacking this competence, we are maimed as readers, and its diminishment in contemporary writers goes hand in hand with a progressive loss in poetic biodiversity and a narrowing in the range of species to be found in literary texts, which is analogous of course to biodiversity loss in general. Nowhere more is this so than in the beleaguered ecosystems of Latin America. I will explore, in the following pages, several twentieth-century poets' awareness of a need for ornithological and botanical competence both for themselves and for their readers, and how they have brought greater biodiversity into their writing. As we shall

see, however, through an analysis of Spanish translations of British authors and of certain species' exclusion from literary texts, particularly in Spanish but also in English, avian biodiversity in poetry is limited not just by a lack of ornithological competence but by language itself. Lastly, I will show how contemporary technology can bolster our ornithological competence.

Botanical and Ornithological Competence in Spanish American Poets

Modern humanity has lacked the ecological competence needed to stem deforestation, global warming and biodiversity loss. An ever higher percentage of the human population has turned its back on non-human nature, and on doing so has suffered a corresponding loss in ornithological and botanical competence: as species dwindle, the number of birds, trees and flowers we relate to and are able to identify grows smaller by the decade. Spanish American poets seem particularly aware of their lack of botanical competence. Chilean Jorge Teillier, in *Poemas del país de nunca jamás* (Poems from Never-Never Land, 1963), portrays the alienation of those who have abandoned the rural villages of their childhood in dystopian images of urban life: "We have seen the sun / transformed into a black sunflower"; "We see each new love / as a new defeat, / each tomorrow / as a letter we will never open." Perhaps the most decisive image points to the loss of meaningful contact with non-human nature: "We are exiled in a place where no one knows the names of the trees."⁵ Roberto Forns-Broggi remembers Mexican poet David Huerta saying something similar: "I don't know the names of many flowers, or rather, I know many flowers by name but am unable to connect them to the images or concrete reality those names denote. I know it's a deficiency (perhaps even a serious defect) but fate has it that I'm an 'urban' poet" (Forns-Broggi 228). Likewise, another

Mexican, José Emilio Pacheco, in “Las ostras” (The Oysters) –an *ars ecopoetica* for these times of crisis–, lists this defect as a key factor in our lack of ecological competence. “We don’t know the names of flowers, / we’re ignorant of the cardinal points / and of the constellations that high in the sky / watch what’s happening to us with pity or laughter” (*No sabemos los nombres de las flores, / ignoramos los puntos cardinales / y las constelaciones que allá arriba / ven con pena o con burla lo que nos pasa*). Art, claims the poem, is “focused attention” (*atención enfocada*), and as such can be potentially a world-saver, a prelude to meaningful action. We laugh at it (*nos reímos del arte*), however, because we would rather not know, rather live our lives blissfully ignorant and as blind as oysters, ignorant of the “tomb of ice” (*sepulcro de hielo*) that awaits us (Pacheco 435).

Without knowing the names of flowers, readers of Uruguayan Marosa di Giorgio’s poetry cannot help but flounder. Reading *Magnolia* (1965) without knowing what a magnolia is, or what a magnolia is like, without conjuring up sensorial memories (not just visual images, but the thick fleshiness and the scent of the flowers), is to live a dramatically mutilated literary experience. *Magnolia* offers a vast repertoire of flowers and plants: Arabian jasmine, arrowheads, bromelias, camellias, carnations, dahlias, daisies, forget-me-nots, gladioli, hyacinths, jasmine, laurel, lavender, lilacs, lilies, narcissi, orange blossom, poppies, pumpkin flowers, roses, spurge, stock, tulips, violets and wisteria. A reader without the botanical competence needed to respond to this deluge of visual and olfactory stimuli, as well as to memories of touch, taste (the pumpkin flowers) and even hearing (wind lifting the wisteria from a wall), is severely handicapped in his or her approach to the book.

The loss of poetic biodiversity has been a concern of poets from the mid-twentieth century. Mexican poet Salvador Novo began his book *Las aves en la poesía castellana* (Birds in Spanish Poetry, 1953) by reflecting that birds “have fled modern poetry” (*han huido de la poesía moderna*) and that there were no birds (*no hay pájaros*) in contemporary urban life. As

he put it, with his peculiar sense of humor, the “mechanical cage” of the radio had replaced the canary, and “modernity’s knights” (*los caballeros modernos*) preferred automobiles to falcons and hawks (Novo 9-10).

Nicaraguan poets Pablo Antonio Cuadra, in the poems he dedicated to native trees in *Siete árboles contra el atardecer* (Seven Trees against Twilight, 1980), and Esthela Calderón, with the “ethnobotanical” poetry of her *Soplo de corriente vital* (Breath of Life-giving Current, 2008), have fought consciously against the consequences of uncontrolled urban development and the growing divorce from non-human nature that blights modern life and modern literature. They explore Central America’s biodiversity by embracing different species of their country’s flora and presenting them to their readers, fully aware that ancestral knowledge of non-human nature is quickly diminishing and that a basic duty for a poet is to help preserve it.⁶

They are not the only ones. Nobel-prize winning Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral had already embarked on a pedagogical quest of her own with the mother-figure of the “mama,” the ghostly protagonist and poetic voice of her posthumous *Poema de Chile* (1967), who instructs an indigenous Diaguita child as they journey on foot from the Atacama desert in Chile’s north to the Patagonian south. Along the way she names and explains the flora and fauna they see, trying to instill interest and respect in the boy and to curb his destructive, masculine yearning to hunt all that moves. In “Emigración de pájaros” (The Migration of Birds), she complains of how indifferent people have become to birds: “People, my young one, know / little or nothing about birds” (*Las gentes, chiquito, saben / de pájaros poco o nada*). Her instruction, however, bears fruit: after being shown the flight and the cries of migrating pelicans, the boy is at last infected with her enthusiasm: “Tell me more, mama, tell me more” (*Cuenta más, cuenta, la mama*) (Mistral 126-127).

Chile's other Nobel-prize winner, Pablo Neruda, was just as pedagogical in his book *Arte de pájaros* (Art of Birds, 1966), with its 37 poems about different species of Chilean birds, but more influential, poetically, was the opening section of his majestic *Canto general* (General Song, 1950), which is set in 1400 and portrays America prior to Columbus' arrival – “my land without a name, without America” (*tierra mía sin nombre, sin América*)–, in poems titled “Vegetaciones,” “Algunas bestias,” “Vienen los pájaros,” “Los ríos acuden,” “Minerales” and “Los hombres.” The display of botanical, zoological, ornithological, geographical, mineralogical and ethnological competence is dazzling. Neruda, who had spent many years abroad –as consul in the Far East, in Argentina and in Spain–, had rediscovered and reconciled himself with his country and his continent when he wrote *Canto general*, and the book aimed to reveal all he had learnt in his travels and studies, to share it with his readers along with his pride in being Chilean and Latin American. In “Vienen los pájaros” (The Birds are Coming), the poet brandishes America's avian biodiversity with vibrant images of 14 species: the cardinals were like “drops of blood and feather” (*como gotas de sangre y plumas*), the toucan an “adorable box of varnished fruits” (*una adorable / caja de frutas barnizadas*), the hummingbirds miniscule bonfires burning in still air (*sus minúsculas hogueras / ardían en el aire inmóvil*), and the condor a murdering king, solitary friar of the sky, the snow's black talisman, and a hurricane of falconry (*el cóndor, rey asesino, / fraile solitario del cielo, / talismán negro de la nieve, / huracán de la cetrería*) (Neruda 421-423). It is interesting to see that Neruda openly recognized his learning process, how he had acquired his knowledge both from personal experience and from the books he read. *Canto general* was largely written in hiding, between January 1948 and February 1949, while he was being pursued by Chilean police for belonging (and having been elected senator) to the recently illegalized Communist Party, and in a poem called “Saludo” (Greeting), he explains that he escaped his country crossing the Andes, bearded and moneyless, without clothes or paper to

write on, with nothing but a coat, a twig from a native tree, and two books: one on Geography, and the other *Las aves de Chile, su conocimiento y sus costumbres* (1946), a landmark in Chilean ornithology by Jack Goodall, Alfred Johnson and Rodolfo Amando Philippi Bañados: “Cuando salí de ti perseguido, erizado / de barbas y pobreza, sin ropa, sin papel / para escribir las letras que son mi vida, sin / nada más que un pequeño saco, traje dos libros / y una sección de espino recién cortada al árbol. / (Los libros: una Geografía / y el Libro de las Aves de Chile)” (748-749).

The Misfortune of Being Called a Troglodyte

Ornithological competence is tempered by the ineffable, not in the sense Juan Ramón Jiménez gave the term, but by what can and cannot be spoken of in a literary text. In a ruthless essay titled “Experimento en Rubén Darío,” Spanish poet Luis Cernuda referred to the “decidedly French” tendency of the Nicaraguan modernist to judge things not by their own value but according to the “reiterated esteem” they had been held in by earlier writers. Darío built his poems with objects he considered intrinsically poetic, with roses, princesses and pearls, with malachite and marquises, peacocks and abundant swans. His poetry, according to Cernuda, was “an ad hoc inventory of all those poetic artifacts” (996-997). Such an artificial outlook on poetry meant, of course, in the world of birds, not just peacocks and swans but also other poetically prestigious winged artefacts: eagles, larks, nightingales and doves.

The end of literary Modernism in Spanish brought with it a loss in the aura of poetic artifacts, firstly with the avant-garde and later on with Nicanor Parra’s antipoetry and the conversational poetry of the Sixties. There are still words, however, that stubbornly resist

being brought into poetry except with the intention of deflating, comic effects, and among them are the names of birds that would seem to be taboo not just in poetry but also in prose. Recent translations of two British classics may be illustrative of a perceived need to censor or modify literary biodiversity to make it palatable for contemporary readers in Spanish. Let us travel for a moment to 1937 and the Spanish Civil War, to the Republican front in Aragon's Alcubierre Sierra. Nowhere in the world had militiaman George Orwell seen fewer birds: just "a kind of magpie," the odd partridge and now and again an eagle indifferent to gunshot. In *Homage to Catalonia*, however, he often uses bird imagery for a precise portrayal of his experience. The militia's position, he explains, "was perched on a sort of razor-back of limestone with dug-outs driven horizontally into the cliff like sand-martins' nests" (*Orwell in Spain*, 58). Both translations I have consulted talk of swallows' nests (*nidos de golondrinas*), which destroys the image. Swallow's nests are basket-shaped appendages of mud and grass stuck under a ledge, whereas sand martins bore long tunnels into banks or cliff faces to make theirs. The translators may have known this, but they also knew that Orwell's English readers in 1938 had little to do with today's readers in Spanish. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has more than 1.1 million members; its Spanish equivalent, the Sociedad Española de Ornitología, has recently reached 12,000. Very few readers in Spanish today have the ornithological competence to know what a sand martin is; fewer still would be able to visualize its nest. Besides, the bird's name itself is an obstacle. *Avión*, in Spain, is both martin and airplane, but for a vast majority it means just the latter; and a sand martin in Spanish is *avión zapador*, which is literally "shoveling airplane" or "sapper airplane." Without footnotes, the translation is impossible.

In another moment of *Homage to Catalonia*, Orwell talks of "stray bullets flying high overhead like redshanks whistling" (*Orwell in Spain*, 48). I have no idea how many of Orwell's original readers would have known what a redshank is and

been able to recognize its call, but I am certain that virtually no readers in Spanish, today, have the linguistic, literary, ornithological or whatever other type of competence is necessary to know what an *archibebe común* is, and not just that, but to identify its call and thus be able to imagine the sound of those bullets flying over the trenches. Once again, the name in Spanish offers little help. It's a mouthful, it's ungainly, and it cannot be shortened. Orwell alludes to a redshank (*tringa totanus*), not needing to distinguish it as “common” from the spotted redshank (*tringa erythropus*), which is a non-breeder in the U.K.; in Spain, however, the adjective is imperative: an *archibebe común* (common redshank) has to be discerned not just from the *archibebe oscuro* (spotted redshank), but also from the *archibebe claro* (greenshank, *tringa nebularia*) and the *archibebe fino* (march sandpiper, *tringa stagnatilis*). Orwell was right: there is something of the (common) redshank's whistle in the sound of a bullet, but in those two rather fudged attempts at translation that I consulted, the precise imagery of the English is ravaged. One talks of the bullets flying by like “gallinetas silbantes” (whistling moorhen); in the other, they sound like “pajarillos piando” (little birds chirping).⁷

The opening line of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* can also shed light on the literary difficulties of certain words and expressions. The novel begins, of course, with Mrs. Ramsay promising her son James that tomorrow, at last, he will be able to fulfil his dream of visiting the lighthouse: “‘Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow,’ said Mrs. Ramsay. ‘But you'll have to be up with the lark,’ she added.” I was intrigued to discover, in a translation by Lumen (2011), that the lark had disappeared: “—Pues claro, siempre que mañana haga bueno —dijo la señora Ramsay—. *Pero tendréis que levantaros al despuntar el día* —añadió.” Literally: *but you'll have to get up at the crack of dawn*. In an on-line article by Sonsoles García-Albertos, I found a “microscopic” analysis of different versions of *To the Lighthouse* that centered on this idiomatic expression *to be up with the lark*. The problem, claims García-Albertos, is that there is no equivalent in peninsular Spanish, and that to keep the reference to

a bird it would have to be *antes de que cante el gallo*, before the cock crows, which would clash “with the elevated register of the original text, where the lark offers more adequate connotations of freedom and elegance.” In contrast to the version in Lumen, she points to Dámaso López’s “extremely literal” translation for the 1999 annotated edition in Cátedra: “—Sí, mañana, por supuesto, si hace bueno —dijo Mrs. Ramsay—. *Pero tendréis que levantaros con la alondra* —agregó” (García-Albertos). This is, indeed, literal in the maintenance of the English title “Mrs.,” and particularly in the allusion to the lark: *But you’ll have to get up with the lark*. It goes without saying that fidelity is not the only, and perhaps not even the main virtue of a translator, but although the result is less natural it is valuable here in two ways: firstly, because the Ramsay family are from London, they are on holiday in the island of Skye, and the lark places us from the start in a rural context, in contact with the “natural” world and far from the city; secondly, because the skylark population has suffered an alarming decline in the British Isles in recent decades, and in 2015 was put on the “Red List” of threatened birds. For it to be eliminated from the opening sentence of one of modernity’s great novels is an act of ecocide, a literary contribution to biodiversity loss. This sort of censorship or self-censorship has been internalized, I fear, and comes naturally not just to translators but to many contemporary writers, who either themselves lack ornithological competence or are unwilling to tax their readers with any kind of unexpected avian biodiversity.

Are there artifacts and words simply incompatible with poetry and literature in general, or compatible only for comic effects and for creating ugliness? Surely not. Just look at the greats. Even in the act of defecating Peruvian César Vallejo found an image of intimacy in the opening poem of *Trilce* (published in 1922, the same year in which Joyce’s Bloom visited the outhouse); and Neruda, in *Residencia en la tierra*

(Residence on Earth, 1935) showed that urinating itself, or hearing the person you love “urinate in the darkness, at the back of the house, / as though pouring forth a thin, tremulous, shining, obstinate stream of honey” (*oírte orinar, en la oscuridad, en el fondo de la casa, / como vertiendo una miel delgada, trémula, argentina, obstinada*), can also be an act of beauty (Neruda 292). But there are words, if not quite incompatible, that offer an almost insurmountable resistance to poetry, and some –as we have already seen– refer to birds. I used to think it was the case of the Spanish word for nightjar. Almost twenty years ago, when Spanish poet Vanesa Pérez-Sauquillo and I translated a selection of Dylan Thomas’ poetry, the nightjar in “Fern Hill” caused us all sorts of problems: “As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away, / All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjar / Flying with the ricks, and the horses / Flashing into the dark.” Nightjar, which in English sounds almost as melodious as nightingale, is in peninsular Spanish *chotacabras*, a word as ugly as they come, a direct translation of the names in Greek (*αίγοθήλας*) and Latin (*caprimulgus*) and an equivalent to the archaic English usage of *goatsucker*, whose origin was a legend that had the bird entering stables at night or sucking from the goats in the fields. *Chotacabras* would have been a mortal wound to the fired-up lyricism of Thomas’s childhood elegy, so as translators we opted out (perpetrating another act of literary biodiversity loss) with *aves nocturnas* (night birds) (Thomas 154-155).

Federico García Lorca, who wanted a nightjar’s call for the most dearly loved of his *romances*, “Romance a la luna, luna” (Ballad to the Moon, Moon), went in search of an obscure but uniquely melodious local Andalusian word, *zumaya*, and Neruda, in his “Vienen los pájaros” (mentioned above), found an American term, derived from the bird’s habit of lying camouflaged on the ground: *atajacaminos*, the path-blocker. I was wrong, however, about the misfortune of being called a goatsucker. My colleague Jesús Cano Reyes sent me a poem by Peruvian José Watanabe, “El acuerdo” (The Agreement), which has a *chotacabras*

as protagonist: “The goatsucker bird / is perched on the bull’s back” (*El pájaro chotacabras / está posado sobre la espalda del toro*). The poem’s core, however, is not the bird itself but rather its symbiotic relationship with the bull: the nightjar cleans the bull’s skin, using its beak “as a delicate nurse’s implement / prying / for the larvae that bite under its skin” (*como delicado instrumento de enfermera / buscándole / las larvas que le muerden bajo la piel*). It receives, in recompense, “a vast tenderness that no one could suspect” (*una vasta ternura que nadie sospecha*) (Watanabe 14).

Chotacabras is, after all, poetic material. Even so, there are species that simply are not. Take, for example, one of the most loved families of birds, the Paridae. Every one of its members has a name which, if cumbersome in Spanish, is poetically impossible in British English (not so much in the U.S., where the word “titmouse” – archaic and out of use in the U.K. – is just about tolerable in a poem).⁸ I refer above all to the blue tit (*herrerillo común*: literally, common little blacksmith), to the great tit (*carbonero común*: common coal merchant), to the coal tit (*carbonero garrapinos*: pine-tree grabbing coal merchant) and to the long-tailed tit, although it does not in fact belong to the Paridae (*mito*: myth). Tit, in English, is a complicated word because on the one hand it is of Scandinavian origin, from the Icelandic *titlingur* (small) or the Norwegian *titta* (little bird), but it is also derived from the German *zitze* and old English *titt*, meaning teat, and is a slang term both for a woman’s breasts and for an idiot. This double derivation is the only reason why the blue tit, one of Britain’s most loved birds, and the other tits I have mentioned have been systematically ignored by poets, who know that writing about tits would expose them to facile jokes. There are no tits in Simon Armitage and Tim Dee’s *The Poetry of Birds* (2011), although that is not in fact true: John Clare, in his “Bumbarrel’s Nest,” could celebrate the beauty of a long-tailed tit’s nest and eggs by using the old popular name of the bumbarrel. There

are, likewise, no members of the tit family in the more than 300 pages of bird poems in Víctor Manuel Patiño's anthology *Faunética* (1999). The reason is different: little blacksmiths, coal merchants and myths are not just cumbersome; they would all need footnotes to be readily understood as references to birds.

So literary biodiversity is, as we can see, limited by what can and cannot be said in a poem. In 2015, more than 200,000 Britons voted in a poll on what should be their national bird. The winner was the robin (the blue tit came eighth). In fourth place, came one of the country's smallest birds: the wren, *troglodytes troglodytes*. Chaucer and Shakespeare wrote about wrens; there are poems to the wren by William Wordsworth and John Clare, by twentieth-century poets Ted Hughes, Mary Oliver and Norman Nicholson, and in the twenty-first century by Helen MacDonald. In Italian, Tuscan poet Giovanni Pascoli wrote about the *scricciolo* in one of his best-known poems, "L'uccellino del freddo" (Little Bird of the Cold, 1905), which ended each stanza in an onomatopoeic refrain: "tr trr trr terit tirit..." (Pascoli 13-14); more recently, in 2002, Marco Ceriani has published a book of poetry titled *Lo scricciolo penitente* (The Penitent Wren). In Spanish, however, a wren is a *troglodita*, and with a name like that –as far as poetry goes– there is nothing to be done. If it is a misfortune to be called a tit or an *archibebe común*, it is so too to be a troglodyte, which is too heavy a word for a bird that weighs less than half an ounce. A poem about troglodytes would entail, in any case, a footnote explaining "the poem refers not to a caveman, but to a little bird that builds its nests in holes." Besides, *troglodita* is just one of the wren's names in peninsular Spanish. The other, *chochín*, is even more complicated: it is a diminutive of *chocho*, which is slang for vagina. To sing of a *chochín* would be as open to mockery as singing about tits.

The same is not true, however, in Latin America. The European wren's nearest relation, *troglodytes musculus* or southern house wren, is called in Chile by its name in Mapudungun: *chercán*. The Spanish Royal Academy's dictionary definition is as strange as

it is insulting. After signaling the *chercán*'s Chilean origin, it states: "Bird similar to the nightingale in form and color, but with a far less melodious song" (*Pájaro semejante al ruiseñor en la forma y el color, pero de canto mucho menos dulce*). The comment is grossly Eurocentric and shows, besides, striking ornithological incompetence. What could bring an academician to compare the *chercán* not to the European *trogodita* but to a bird of a different family, with a different-shaped tail and different habits, and which is far larger (16 cm, instead of the *chercán*'s 11)? And why compare its song to the greatest singer in the kingdom of birds? The *chercán*, however, has its revenge. It is poetic material. The first poem Neruda dedicated to a bird was called "Chercanes." He wrote it in the early Forties and included it in *Canto general*. In the *chercán* he found a means of recovering his roots after years of travel, a way back home to the symbiosis with non-human nature he had experienced as a child in the Chilean Frontier:

Dear, diminutive birds, come into my head.

Nest on my shoulders, where a lizard

has glowed, and in my thoughts

where so many leaves have fallen.

Oh small circles of sweetness, grains

of winged cereals, little feathered eggs,

the purest of forms with pinpoint eyes

driving forward flight and life.⁹

A Soundtrack of Birds

How many of us, if we could hide in the foliage of a garden in Verona and witness what is perhaps theater's most famous dialogue, would be able, today, to distinguish the songs of the nightingale and the lark, and urge the loved-ones, accordingly, to proceed with their wooing or for Romeo to flee and Juliet to hurriedly close her balcony window. When birds become just names, and no longer conjure up memories of their color, their habits and their song, then we are at a severe disadvantage when we read. We are condemned to be armchair or library readers. Basic ornithological competence is needed to be a competent reader of poetry. To read Shelley's ode to a skylark, or Keats' to a nightingale –both so imbued with first-hand acoustic experience–, without being able to call on our own memories of skylarks spiraling upward as they sing, higher still and higher, or without having heard the night expand with a nightingale's prodigious repertoire of melodies, is surely tragic.

Strange to say, contemporary technology can help us as readers. Turn off the lights, search on internet for larks and nightingales singing, and some sort of vicarious experience can be had, something as a reader can be learnt. With nightingales and larks, everything of course is easy. But take one of the lesser-studied poems of César Vallejo, "Los arrieros" (The Mule Drivers), from his first book, *Los heraldos negros* (The Black Heralds, 1919). The Andean midday sun dominates the poem. The mule driver, in his red poncho, is sweating so much that an almost unreal glow surrounds him (*vas vidriado fabulosamente de sudor*). He is contented, however. Accompanied by his donkey, he suffers no existential problems and he knows where he is going, he chews his coca leaves and does his job, in contrast to the poetic speaker, who watches from a hammock and is riven by doubt. The speaker's spirit is agitated –no coca leaves can calm him down– and, unlike the mule driver, he feels totally lost:

And in a hammock I ponder,
from a century of doubt,

your horizon. Mourned by mosquitos
 and the courteous and sickly
 refrain of a “paca-paca,” I watch you go.
 You’ll get where you’re heading in the end,
 mule-driver. Behind your sanctimonious donkey
 you leave...
 you leave...¹⁰

The poem’s setting is clear: we are shown a mule driver and his donkey, with the Andes in the background and the speaker in a hammock, but there are two other creatures. Most Spanish readers will recognize the Spanish American term for mosquito, *zancudo*, and we can recreate –living vicariously the scene portrayed– the insect’s persistent harassing, despite the strangeness of the past participle *lamentado* (mourned). There seems to be an analogy between the mosquito’s shrill hum and the murmured lamentation of human mourners surrounding a corpse. But it is not only the mosquito that mourns; the “paca-paca” does so, too, with its *estribillo gentil / y enfermo*. The quotation marks point to it being a regional or colloquial term, and any non-Peruvian –even, perhaps, any non-Andean Peruvian– might deduce, from what is presumably an onomatopoeia, that it refers to another insect. No dictionary, no pre-2000 encyclopedia would have helped, but internet does. In Vallejo’s Western Andes, the *paca-paca* –or *chuncho del norte* (*glaucidium peruanum*)– is a species of little owl: the Peruvian or Pacific pygmy owl. On YouTube you can see it, you can hear it sing. What is an owl doing under the midday sun? The answer is that the *paca-paca* is unusually active in daytime. It lives on the western slopes and valleys of the Andes in Peru, Ecuador and the north of Chile, where its habitat overlaps with that of its close relative, the Austral pygmy owl (*glaucidium nanum*). The call of both is generally transcribed as a

monotonous series of *took took took took*, or *poop poop poop poop*, slightly brisker (four notes per second) in the case of the Peruvian pygmy owl. It is, indeed, a tiresome refrain or *estribillo*, that some might interpret as *paca paca* (and others, as we shall see, as *killkill*).

The very presence of the *paca paca* brings with it mortuary connotations, even more so than with other owls. According to Andean superstition, seeing and above all hearing a *chuncho* –a name derived from the Quechuan *ch'uncho* (plumage)– is bad luck, which explains why the expression “to kill a pygmy owl” (*matar un chuncho*) means to put an end to a jinx. Mapuche poet Lorenzo Aillapan, in his poem about the *chuncho*, or *killkill* in Mapudungun, tells how it scares people by announcing bad news: a man who is away will never return; another will be abandoned by his wife. “That’s exactly what happened!, people exclaim; / It’s just as *killkill* the nightbird announced!” (*¡Era tan cierta la cosa! exclama la gente, / ¡el anuncio del pájaro nocturno killkill era tal!*) (Aillapan 40). What it often announces is death, and there is a well-known Andean saying which shows marvelous awareness of how reason and superstition contradict each other: “When the *chuncho* sings an Indian dies, it may not be true but it happens” (*Cuando canta el chuncho un indio muere, no será cierto pero sucede*). One of Chilean folklorist Jorge Yáñez’s most famous songs begins: “Anoche me cantó el chuncho / al pasar frente a tu puerta. / Morirás antes de un año / me gritó feliz mi suegra / mientras se arreglaba el velo / y cruzaba hacia la iglesia” (Last night I was sung to by a *chuncho* when I passed in front of your door. You’ll be dead within a year!, shouted my mother in law in delight, as she straightened her veil and headed off to the church).¹¹

César Vallejo’s *paca-paca* also announces a death, the death of the speaker, whom the mosquitos too are already mourning. It is, however, no normal death. The speaker is dead in life, like Eliot’s hollow men with their *headpiece filled with straw*. He is spiritually mutilated,

alienated from the Andean world of which the mule driver, in contrast, with his sanctimonious donkey, forms a sweaty, contented part.

The call of the *paca-paca* is just one element in the soundtrack of birdsong that readers of Spanish American poetry require. As is the song of the *cacuy* or common potoo, a New-World species of nightjar (*nictybius griseus*). Readers of Argentine avant-garde literature will remember a fragment from Oliverio Girondo's *Espantapájaros* (Scarecrow, 1932), a series of variations on the theme of tears: “llorar como un cacuy, como un cocodrilo... si es verdad que los cacuias y los cocodrilos no dejan nunca de llorar” (to cry like a potoo, like a crocodile... if it's true that potoos and crocodiles never stop crying) (Girondo 212). The potoo's crying forms an essential part of rural Argentina's folklore. *Estar hecho un cacuy* means to be a bundle of tears, and in a 1926 anthology of *Antiguos cantos populares argentinos*, there is a stanza that reads: “Como cacuy solitario / me retiraré a vivir, / a llorar las desventuras / que tu amor me hace sentir” (like a solitary potoo I will retire and live, crying the misfortune your love makes me feel) (Carrizo 186).

Different texts offer different explanations for this crying. In the late nineteenth century, Argentine “national poet” Rafael Obligado portrayed, in “El cacui,” a honey-collector in the province of Salta who has heard a woman's tears and sworn to rescue her from her tyrannical father. His colleagues explain: the crying woman is in fact a potoo and the father he has seen is her brother, who grew so sick of his sister –“who was a very pretty young girl / but behaved like a worm” (*que era moza muy linda, / pero en los hechos, gusano*)– that he persuaded her to climb a tree to get honey from a comb, and then cut all the branches so she couldn't get down. Trapped in the tree, she was transformed into a *cacui* and since then had never stopped crying (Obligado 231).

The metamorphosis seems always to descend on a desperate or bereaved woman. In W.H. Hudson's short story “Marta Riquelme,” from his book *El ombú* (1902), the protagonist

–before becoming a “Kakué”– was abandoned by her husband, kidnapped by Indians, forced to remarry and then saw all her children die. *Cacuy* is a Quechuan word meaning to stay in the same place or remain still. That is what potoos do, perfectly camouflaged on the stump or branch of a dead tree (you can see them on internet –bark-like and motionless by day; deranged-looking bulgy-yellow-eyed creatures at night–; you can *hear* them too, with their lugubrious chant). In the Amazonian regions of eastern Peru, their name is *ayaymama*, as if they were children calling in vain for their mother: “¡ay, ay, mamá!” and in Peruvian Ciro Alegría’s most important novel, *El mundo es ancho y ajeno* (1941), a worker from a rubber plantation tells of a young girl turned into *ayaymama* as punishment after her mother, wife of a brave cacique, refused the advances of Chullachaquil, the jungle’s evil spirit (Alegría 383-386).

The word for a potoo in Guarani is *urutaú*. Paulina Martínez, in “La tristeza del urutaú” (The Potoo’s Sadness, 2010), tells the traditional story of Ñeambuí, daughter of a cacique, who on the eve of her wedding to a man she doesn’t love elopes with a wounded enemy prisoner. Her father orders for them to be hunted down and killed, but Ñeambuí, transformed into an *urutaú*, spends every night, in the depths of the forest, mourning her loved-one’s death (Martínez 41-42). The weeping of an *urutaú* leads inevitably to what was the most widely-read poem in Spanish America in the years leading up to Modernism. “Nenia” (Elegy) was written with scarcely concealed guilt by Argentine poet Carlos Guido Spano, at the end of the so-called War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1869), during which Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, together, literally decimated the population of Paraguay. Puerto Rican intellectual Eugenio María de Hostos called it “the most persuasive song of death that the sense of justice has ever inspired,” and urged “all who have an American heart” to accompany him in “imbuing ourselves in the somber, heart-wrenching, desperate and patriotic tenderness that sobs, groans and weeps in ‘Nenia’” (Hostos 192; 209).

In years in which, as teachers and researchers, we never cease to lament the damage contemporary technology wreaks on the reading habits of younger generations, I find it bewildering that internet, by enabling us to see and hear an *urutaú*, and so many other species of birds, can allow us to envisage the majestic but endangered biodiversity of Latin America, and to bolster our limited ornithological competence, making us better readers of poetry in the process. In the case of “Nenia,” it can help us feel with even greater intensity this most poignant of elegies, knowing that the poetic speaker, who mourns the loss of her family, her country and the man she loved, will herself sing and cry until the end of time (or the end of Paraguay’s forests), transformed into an *urutaú*:

En idioma guaraní,
una joven paraguaya,
tiernas endechas ensaya
cantando en el arpa así,
en idioma guaraní:

¡Llora, llora urutaú
en las ramas del yatay;
ya no existe el Paraguay
donde nací como tú—
Llora, llora, urutaú!

In the Guarani language
a young Paraguayan
breathed a tender lament
singing to her harp
in the Guarani language:

Weep, weep, urutaú
in the branches of the yatay;
it’s the end of Paraguay,
where I was born just like you—
Weep, weep, urutaú!

(Guido Spano 39).

Reading in the Late Anthropocene

Birds have been protagonists since poetry began: Catullus' sparrow, Farid ud-Din Attar's hoopoe, Heine and Keats' nightingale, Coleridge and Baudelaire's albatross, Poe's raven, Bécquer's swallow, Darío's swan, Marianne Moore's ostrich, Ted Hughes's hawk, Mary Oliver's wild geese... The list could go on and on, covering every language and country. It is hardly strange, however, that birds should be so important in Latin American poetry. After all, no other region can boast such avian biodiversity. According to Birdlife International's 2019 ranking, Colombia has more species of bird than any other country in the world. Peru is second in the ranking, Brazil third, Ecuador fifth, Bolivia sixth, Venezuela seventh, Mexico eleventh and Argentina fifteenth. A country the size of Panama has more species of bird than the United States. There is greater avian biodiversity in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chile and Uruguay than in Spain (which is considered a bird-watcher's paradise in Europe).¹²

In 2021, it is a truth almost universally acknowledged, despite political floundering and wholesale reticence about the need to act, that Edward O. Wilson was right when he wrote that "biological diversity –'biodiversity' in the new parlance– is the key to the maintenance of the world as we know it" (13). Since the mid-twentieth century, an influential minority of Spanish American poets have fought to help maintain the world as they know it by naming and defending –within the limits of what can and cannot be said in a poem– the extraordinary diversity of the flora and fauna to be found in their regions, and by cultivating, both in themselves and in their readers, the ecological and ornithological competence necessary to live and read in the Late Anthropocene.

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¹ All translations from the Spanish are mine.

² When I speak of Modernism in a Spanish or Spanish American context, I refer to the important turn-of-the-century Parnassian and Symbolist movement whose major figure was Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío.

³ José Francisco Díaz Alonso questions the veracity of the anecdote and laments that it has helped create the caricature of Villaespesa as a paradigm of superficial modernist writing: “What could have been just a trivial,

irrelevant anecdote has ended up being decisive.” This is particularly unfair, he argues, because in no moment of his poetry does Villaespesa mention water lilies (Díaz Alonso 222-226).

⁴ Here is my translation (from the Spanish) of the final stanza of Aillapan’s poem “Queltehue/Tregül” (Southern Lapwing): “Good weather, good harvests, good sowing! / They chant lengthy songs as if praying, / and are always curious about what happens all around them. / Winged guardians of our land / that alert us of impending danger. / Untiring orators of Mother Earth: / Trüliliu trüliliu trüliliu trüliliu / triliu triliu trilui trilui!” (Aillapan 8).

⁵ “Acompañennos / a nosotros que hemos visto el sol / transformarse en un girasol negro. / . . . / A nosotros / los desterrados en un lugar en donde nadie conoce el nombre de los árboles, / donde vemos todo próximo amor / como una próxima derrota, / toda mañana como una carta que nunca abriremos” (Teillier 44).

⁶ According to Steven F. White: “As an heir to the legacy of her compatriot Pablo Antonio Cuadra and his *Siete árboles contra el atardecer* (1980), Esthela Calderón has been able to listen and create poetry of an admirable intimacy and ethnobotanical precision from the flora she has spoken and sung of since her childhood on a farm in Telica” (464-465).

⁷ The translations belong to Virus editorial’s *Homenaje a Cataluña* (43); the second to Tusquets’ *Orwell en España* (88). The swallows’ nests appear on pages 58 and 97, respectively.

⁸ Billy Collins includes English writer Walter de la Mare’s “Titmouse” in his anthology *Bright Wings*, next to an illustration of the tufted titmouse, a U.S. species not found in Europe (170-171). De la Mare’s choice of the archaism was clearly motivated by the need to avoid the perils of talking about tits.

⁹ “Minúsculos, amados, venid a mi cabeza. / Anidad en mis hombros en los que pasea / el fulgor de un lagarto, en mis pensamientos / sobre los que han caído tantas hojas, / oh círculos pequeños de la dulzura, granos / de alado cereal, huevecillo emplumado, / formas purísimas en que el ojo / certero dirige vuelo y vida” (Neruda 651-652).

¹⁰ “Y yo desde una hamaca, / desde un siglo de duda, / cavilo tu horizonte, y atisbo, lamentado / por zancudos y por el estribillo gentil / y enfermo de una ‘paca-paca.’ / Al fin tú llegarás donde debes llegar, / arriero, que, detrás de tu burro santurrón, / te vas... / te vas...” (Vallejo 58-59).

¹¹ Los Moros and Jorge Yáñez, “Añoche me cantó el chuncho” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Aid1Y-IrtI>, consulted 15-IV-2021).

¹² See <https://rainforests.mongabay.com/03birds.htm> (consulted 15-IV-2021).